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English 871

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Galatea: Mythical Queen of Noir and Conundrum

Good stories never die; they endure. One of these is the ancient story of a Cypriot sculptor named Pygmalion. His tale was captured by Ovid and recorded in Book X of *The Metamorphosis*, in one of the songs of Orpheus. Pygmalion was a lonely but upright man and a carver of statues, who sculpted an ivory statue of a beautiful, ideal woman. His loneliness is pathetic because he cared for the figure as though she were alive. Because of his devotion to the gods, especially Venus, his carving of the woman was brought to life, and he married the now-living woman, who bore him a daughter. The woman is now popularly named Galatea, based on an opera character from Jean Jacques-Rousseau's opera, *Pygmalion* (Hersey 101). Some of the emotions of this story ----specifically the loneliness and longing for love--- were recaptured in the Internet Fictional (IF) piece entitled *Galatea*. The focus of this writer is to address three aspects of the IF work: Its allure as a possible literary work, its accessibility as a work of Internet Fiction and its situation as a work of literature or game.

Designed and developed by Emily Short, *Galatea* was first released in 2000, and won awards and recognition in its internet genre. A generic description/profile of *Galatea* identifies this fiction and presents a reader with its iconic image: a Caucasian woman in a green, silk, backless cocktail dress viewed obliquely as she is facing a curtain. Her face itself is hidden from the viewer/player, a feature which adds to the mystery and attractiveness of the game package. The identifying scene resembles---and may be modelled on---one of David Lynch's

mise-en-scene in *Twin Peaks*, in which a dwarf, played by Michael J. Anderson, dances in a spotlight before a red curtain. The connection here is that such film noir features are part of the *literary appeals* to this *game*. Film noir often involves a trapped woman, and may lead to an obsessed man's endangerment. (The lighting depicted in the icon, which creates a partially obscured image, too, is part of the film noir technique and metaphor).

The second literary appeal is that of myth. Galatea is the name of a water spirit in several classical sources, including Homer and Hesiod, and was considered the most beautiful of the 50 nereids (Ovid, Book XIII, 738-788). A possible scholarly mistake by Jean-Jacques Rousseau led to Pygmalion's statue-wife being named Galatea (Hersey 101). This was in the 18th Century long after the classical period. The IF version of Galatea also plays on this second, mythical appeal of literature.

The third literary appeal is the appeal of mystery. The reader-viewer-player wants to know more about this apparently-abandoned woman, who stands alone in a curtained gallery, like the work of art in the Ovidian story. Questions are inevitable. Who created her? Why was she abandoned? Is she a gatekeeper? If so, what is she hiding or protecting? One other aspect of mystery is that, according to the author's preliminary discussion of the game, "The artist has since committed suicide" (IFDB). A high potential for intrigue exists.

There is another aspect of literary mystery: *Are we the visitors ourselves in danger?* What is our destiny in this cyber-venue? What is the code of conduct? What are the implications and consequences of choices that we make?

The designer herself discusses the game in highly accessible, personable and descriptive prose. Here is how she describes it:

Galatea has what I call a multilinear plot: unlike traditional IF, it has no single path to

victory. Instead there are a large number of endings, some more satisfactory than others, of which many could be considered "win" states. It takes only a few minutes of play to arrive at an ending, but considerably longer to find all of them. The game also takes an ambitious approach to NPC (non-player character) conversation, both in terms of volume (Galatea has many hundreds of things to say) and complexity (she keeps track of the state of conversation and reacts differently according to what has already been said and done). (Short IFDB)

This rendering is reinforced by commentary that accompanies the IFDB game; Duncan Stevens commented that, “The same question can elicit a wide variety of responses depending on the character's mood, which in turn depends on a variety of things, including the progress of the conversation up to that point” (Stevens Duncan IFDB Editorial comments).

As this writer attempted to navigate into the Galatea program, he found that a highly restricted vocabulary described as “natural language” precluded easy entry into the site and into the woman’s story. The following are journal entries:

Session #1 6-26-2017

Question/Prompt Number	Question or prompt	Response	Side notes
1	Good afternoon	Not a verb I recognize	Rejection #1
2	Look at the curtain	Heavy black velvet, making her skin seem even paler and more alien by contrast.	Emboldened for substance. Response #1

3	Hear anything	You can't see any such thing	Earlier instructions suggested traveler use verbs related to the senses, like touch, so I presumed <i>hear</i> would be acceptable. Rejection #2
4	Touch the curtain	It does look invitingly fuzzy. Fiddling with the accoutrements of an installation is considered poor form, however.	Response reveals sensitivity to both aesthetics and social decorum. Response #2.
5	None	Authorial commentary #1	See note below
6	Do you have a father	That's not a verb I recognize...I beg your pardon	Rejection #3 (but why the request for pardon?)
7	Listen to me	You hear nothing unexpected.	Response #3 --an evasive answer.
8	Smell something strange	You can't see any such thing.	Response #4 – Question was asked because it is related senses. Response is concerned with seeing and not smelling.

Note #1. AUTHOR: (An attempt to engage the audience -- the proactive element... you frame the words for your review, but you find that you can't get as far as a complete first sentence. There's something more here; anxious, chilly, visceral. Better pay attention.)

Session #2 6-27-2017

(Some of the following questions repeat verbs which were rejected earlier. Because the direction was to use verbs about the senses and because I needed to test the edges of this game, I repeated myself anyway).

Question/Prompt Number	Question or prompt	Response	Side notes
1A	Can you see me?	That's not a verb I recognize	Rejection #1A
2A	See me	That's not a verb I recognize	Rejection #2A
3A	Comfortable	That's not a verb I recognize	Rejection 3A
4A	See	That's not a verb I recognize	Rejection 4A

5A	Feel cold?	You can't see any such thing	Rejection 5A –see is a response to feel.
6A	Touch the curtain	It does look invitingly fuzzy. Fiddling with the accoutrements of an installation is considered poor form, however.	Response 1A – same as Response 2, Session 1
7A	Hear anything?	You can't see any such thing.	Rejection 6A- see is in response to hear
8A	Look OK?	I only understood you as far as wanting to look.	Response 2A – interpretive of the question
9A	May I look at you?	That's not a verb I recognize	Rejection 7A
10A	Touch your arm	You can't see any such thing	Rejection 8A – seeing in response to touching
11A	Touch face	You can't see any such thing	Rejection 9A – same as above
12A	Touch your back	You can't see any such thing	Rejection 10A – same as above
13A	Like the curtain	That's not a verb I recognize	Rejection 11A – back to verbs
14A	Touch my arm?	You can't see any such thing	Rejection 12A – see in response to touch
15A	See the window	That's not a verb I recognize	Rejection 13A -
16A	Hear anything	You can't see any such thing	Rejection 14A – see in response to hear

Session #3 6-28-2017

Question/Prompt Number	Question or prompt	Response	Side notes
1B	Touch the curtain	It does look invitingly fuzzy. Fiddling with the accoutrements of an installation is considered poor form, however.	Response 1B
2B	Touch the pedestal	<p>That kind of interaction with the installation would earn you a lasting reputation for eccentricity, were you to be caught at it.</p> <p>"You might try speaking to me," she prompts. "It's not polite merely to stare. And I've gotten very bored, standing here."</p> <p>(An attempt to engage the audience -- the proactive element... you frame the words for your review, but you find that you can't get as far as a complete first sentence. There's something more here; anxious, chilly, visceral. Better pay attention.)</p>	Response 2B – Suggestion and admonition
3B	See any door	That's not a verb I recognize.	Rejection 1B

4B	Hear any sounds	You can't see any such thing.	Rejection 2B – rejection adopts see in response to a hear question.
5B	Smell perfume	You can't see any such thing.	Rejection 3B - response involves sight and not smell
6B	Taste anything	You can't see any such thing.	Rejection 4B – see in response to a taste question
7B	Touch my arm	Her skin is smooth and warm, though it lacks the velvety finish of a Hazar; no flaws, no hair, and the musculature underneath is fairly soft.	Response 3B – describes Galatea's skin in either the player's or the author's voice; it's her skin , not my skin.
8B	Touch my face	You can't reach with her standing the way she is	Response 3C – the response's voice suggest that the prompt comes from Galatea and not from the player.
9B-14B	Various	All rejections	

An online demonstration on YouTube employs a different approach. It treats the questions/prompts as though they were asked by a mouse or rat on the player's shoulder (reminding one of *Ratatouille*) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8TIduTJ-MWk>). For example, “Ask her about strangeness [in the relationship between Galatea and her sculptor]” uses the rat-on-the-shoulder method. The response yields a two-paragraph response of intimate tension, beginning with, “He avoided me. He was uncomfortable; he wouldn't meet my eye...Finally I made him talk to me and he told me that he didn't want me to be alive. He asked me in fact, if I would go back to being a statue....Then she hunches her shoulder... ‘said no.’ ” (Just to recollect, intimate tension is also a feature of film noir).

Responding to this YouTube approach, I inserted the question, “>ask her about the artist.” A full, legitimate response emerged: “(Galatea about the artist) Her head moves -- as though she were going to turn and look at you properly -- but then she thinks better of it. ‘I don't know where he is,’ she says. ‘Or who, or what, for that matter. He sold me immediately after my waking. While he was carving me, there was no strangeness, but afterward...’ ”

I added a second question: “>ask her about his death. Was he despondent?” (This may seem morbid, but Emily Short indicated in a separate entry that he had committed suicide).

Here is a boxed variety of questions/prompts and responses:

Session #4 – 7-01-2017

Question/Prompt Number	Question or prompt (Rat-on-the-shoulder)	Response	Side notes
1C	Ask her about the artist's death	(Galatea about) You can't form your question into words.	Response 1C. Galatea has turned to face the interviewer. Body language carries a message. Her refusal to respond in words suggests Galatea controls her visitors b using strictures of language, like the sphinx in Oedipus Rex.
2C	Ask her if the artist is still living.	I didn't understand that sentence.	Rejection 1C

3C	Ask her where the artist is	I didn't understand that sentence.	Rejection 2C
4C	Ask her about the man who bought her	(Galatea about) You can't form your question into words. "He had a studio in Cyprus," she continues, dropping one line of thought and picking up another. "That's where I was born -- he brought the marble for me there and carved me."	Response 2C Again, Galatea is using body language instead of words to respond. (See 1C above). After rejecting the question, she responds anyway. (We often do this when we speak; it's a kind of equivocation). (There's probably a rhetorical term for it).
5C	Ask her about any possibility of family-life or love	(Galatea about) You can't form your question into words. "I don't know much about the rest of his career, what he did before he carved me," she continues after a moment. She turns -- not her whole body, just her head, so that you can see one ear behind the cascade of hair. "I do know that he had been commissioned to do some reliefs at one point, but that's about it. Mostly he talked about his travels, his childhood, stories he knew -- personal	Response 3C -- This is the same pattern of rejection-response in 1C and 2C. Note that the viewer can only see Galatea's ear. She thus remains a mystery woman, even after this, her most reactive response.

		things. So if you're curious about him as an artist, you'll have to ask the gallery owners for a biography of some kind."	
6C	>ask her what the artist said about his childhood	I didn't understand that sentence.	Rejection 3C
7C	>ask her if her hands are cold	I didn't understand that sentence.	Rejection 4C
8C	>ask her if she enjoys company	I didn't understand that sentence.	Rejection 5C
9C	>ask her what she remembers about Cypress	I didn't understand that sentence.	Rejection 6C
10C	>ask her if she likes music	I didn't understand that sentence.	Rejection 7C
11C	>ask her if she likes painting	I didn't understand that sentence.	Rejection 8C
12C – 17C	Various	Same rejection wording	Rejections 12, 13, 14, 15, 16 and 17C

At this point, details are emerging, but we seem to be in a loop situation with near-automatic rejections. Some details are emerging to the story---or one of the stories--- of the Venus-like figure in the gallery whose tragic birth, once pieced together, may represent compelling, mythic fiction. The “winner” of the game---like Oedipus and the Sphynx, or the film noir anti-hero Black Irish in *Lady from Shanghai*, or Lenny Weinrib in *The Mighty Aphrodite*---is the player. (Incidentally, Lenny Weinrib is another version of Pygmalion). Galatea seems to be saying, “Ask the right questions and I’ll give you a story,” and she lays them out. Is she a juke-box or a Sybil

or a Sphinx?

To situate this IF, we need to look at its earlier internet presentation. In the year 2000, it was initially introduced as digital art which was powered by Z-machine with platforms compatible with Web browser, Microsoft Windows, Z-machine, Commodore 64, DOS, Apple II, Atari ST, and AmigaOS, Five of these eight systems are no longer in popular use. Now only Z-machine is listed as its engine and platform. The introduction was an instant success. Over the years it has since received the following recognition:

Best of Show, Portrait - [2000 IF Art Show](#)

Nominee, Best Game; Nominee, Best NPCs; Winner, Best Individual

NPC - [2000 XYZZY Awards](#) [sic.]

16th Place - [Interactive Fiction Top 50 of all time \(2011 edition\)](#)

41st Place - [Interactive Fiction Top 50 of all time \(2015 edition\)](#)

Honorable Mention - [The Top Five IF Games \(Adventure Gamers, 2002\)](#) (Short).

There has also been controversy over this work, some of it indirect, over the larger question of art-versus-game. In *The Guardian*, Jonathon Jones questions The New York Museum of Modern Art's collection of video games in his editorial essay, "Sorry MoMa, Video Games are not Art" (2012). His byline reads "Exhibiting Pac-Man and Tetris alongside Picasso and van Gogh will mean game over for any real understanding of art." Employing analogies continuously in his argument, Jones sees art as an artist's "series of personal visions...one person's reaction to life." He considers games to be invalid as art because "Any definition of art that robs [the artist] of an inner response by a human creator is a worthless definition." He calls games "playgrounds [wherein]...the player cannot claim to impose a personal vision of life on the game [while]...the creator of the game has ceded that responsibility."

Contrast Jones' position against that of Naomi Alderman. In her *Guardian* essay, "The First Great Works of Digital Literature are Already Being Written," with the byline "Video Games Could be the Greatest Storytelling Medium of Our Age --- if only the Worlds of Art and Technology Would Stop Arguing and Take Notice." These prefatory statements tell the readers where she stands. Her premise is that "If you [the literary community] want to consider yourself well-read or well-cultured, you need to engage with them [those who consider Grand Theft Auto as experimental literature]." Alderman then pronounces a plan of engagement:

To pick just 10 examples from recent years, it's hard to imagine how you could opine on the future of literature without having played the brilliantly characterful and fourth-wall breaking [*Portal*](#), the sombre and engrossing [*Papers, Please*](#), or the dazzlingly surreal exploration of the American subconscious, [*Kentucky Route Zero*](#). Are you interested in discussing experimental "read it in any order" literature? Then for goodness' sake, play the mystery narratives of [*Her Story*](#) and [*Gone Home*](#) and the hilarious and unsettling [*The Stanley Parable*](#). If you want to talk about how writers can engage with politics, capitalism, or the environmental movement, you'll be showing your ignorance if you haven't played [*Oligarchy*](#).

Alderman then continues with a list that includes *Spider: The Secret of Bryce Manor*, *Passage* and *Journey*, which she describes as "sublime." To be short, Alderman has created a canon of this genre in her essay---yes, this is where it (the treatment of video games as literature) starts. She has acknowledged great, powerful stories, and these we cannot leave behind or we will suffer education's worst possible punishment: ignorance. Without some knowledge of a genre, one cannot have a conversation about the merits of the argument.

Galatea contains substantive markings of literature: film noir, myth, mystery, and narrative tension. It's growing old now, but so is the *Mona Lisa*. We still keep looking.

Works Cited

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Excerpt of Conversation with Galatea

**Galatea**

Copyright (c) 2000-4 by Emily Short. (First-time users should type 'help'.)
Release 3 / Serial number 040208 / Inform v6.15 Library 6/10

The Gallery's End

Unlit, except for the single spotlight; unfurnished, except for the defining swath of black velvet. And a placard on a little stand.

On the pedestal is Galatea.

>Good afternoon

That's not a verb I recognize.

>look at the curtain

Heavy black velvet, making her skin seem even paler and more alien by contrast.

>hear anything

You can't see any such thing.

>touch the curtain

It does look invitingly fuzzy. Fiddling with the accoutrements of an installation is considered poor form, however.

"You might try speaking to me," she prompts. "It's not polite merely to stare. And I've gotten very bored, standing here."

(An attempt to engage the audience -- the proactive element... you frame the words for your review, but you find that you can't get as far as a complete first sentence. There's something more here; anxious, chilly, visceral. Better pay attention.)

>do you have a father

That's not a verb I recognize.

>

I beg your pardon?

>listen to me

You hear nothing unexpected.

>smell something strange

You can't see any such thing.

>feel like a good day

You can't see any such thing.

>taste some candy

You can't see any such thing.

>see anything?

That's not a verb I recognize.

>help

This is an exercise in NPC interactivity. There's no puzzle and no set solution, but a number of options with a number of different outcomes.

HINTS: Ask or tell her about things that you can see, that she mentions, or that you think of yourself. Interact with her physically. Pause to see if she does anything herself. Repeat actions. The order in which you do things is critical: the character's mood and the prior state of the conversation will determine how she reacts.

VERBS: Many standard verbs have been disabled. All the sensory ones (LOOK, LISTEN, SMELL, TOUCH, TASTE) remain, as do the NPC interaction verbs ASK, TELL, HELLO, GOODBYE, and SORRY; KISS, HUG, and ATTACK. You may also find useful THINK and its companion THINK ABOUT, which will remind you of the state of conversation on a given topic. The verb RECAP gives a summary list of topics that you've discussed so far; if she's told you that she's said all she knows on that topic, it appears in italics.

SHORTCUT: 'Ask her about' and 'tell her about' may be abbreviated to A and T. So >A CHEESE is the same as >ASK GALATEA ABOUT CHEESE.

There is an assortment of walkthroughs available at <http://emshort.home.mindspring.com/cheats.htm>, but I suggest not looking at them until you have already experimented somewhat.

Questions / comments / bug reports: emshort@mindspring.com. See also CREDITS.